Gender and Multiculturalism at School – The Migrant Girls' Voices

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years while capital globalization exacerbated social issues, social justice theories and movements, such as multiculturalism and feminism, struggled to build a common agenda of demands. It was due to a combination of factors, including a post-modern emphasis on "difference" and feminist believes (sometimes misguided), that certain cultural practices are particularly harmful to women and must be eliminated. Attempts to combine the agendas have often failed the women and girls they were intended to protect.

In Australia since the 1970s, gender equality and multiculturalism are governmental aims present in policies, particularly in education, but with no combined initiatives and considerable limitations. The young girls from migrant, Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), who are affected by these policies, have very little input in their development; additionally, there is very little research about these girls' experiences studying in Australia.

Here I present the first findings from my ongoing Masters research, utilising in-depth interviews in an attempt to understand the schooling experience of NESB girls, negotiating ethnicity, culture and gender to build a more empowered reality at school and in Australia. As a migrant, feminist researcher, I utilise transnational feminist theories and the Voice-centred relational analysis method to maintain gender and culture visible while keeping the girls' voices central in the process. The result is a tale of unimaginable friendships and circumstances combined with highly valued life possibilities, highlighting the educational system's gaps and resources and the girls' resilience.

Key words: Gender, culture, migration, Educational system, schoolgirls, and transnational feminism.

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Australia (more particularly Queensland) is proud of being very multicultural in nature (1), and for their history in the forefront of gender equality policies in the capitalist Western world (2). These realities however, are not free from contradictions and controversies. Around the world you will hear stories regarding the difficulties of combining an agenda for the equality between sexes and cultural practices that may be claimed by some minority groups (3). The last 30 years of globalisation and Neoliberalism did nothing but exacerbate inequalities and isolate social movements, worsening this scenario (4).

Examples in Australia of disagreement between the multicultural and gender equality agendas are not rare (see, 5) and many times attempts to address the issue are misguided and undermining of one of the sides (6). The tragedy in it all is that giving one agenda up in order to attend the other does not serve the real needs of migrant women and girls that will often require attention to both agendas to acquire social equality (7).

Transnational Feminism is the framework for this study in an attempt to have a research that really captures the needs of these girls. This framework understands that acknowledging differences is not the end but the first step towards identifying commonalities between social equality 'movements' (8), including differences between gender equality and multiculturalism. A transnational feminist analysis starts from the migrant women's/ girls' standpoint, recognising this as the most marginalised standpoint in the discussion 'culture versus gender equality' and recognising that if we can make the school space inclusive for these girls, it will be inclusive for everybody. Nevertheless, in order to bring real change to these girls' lives, Fraser (2007) points out that multiple dimensions of the problem need to be attended, in her words, issues of Recognition, Redistribution and Representation (9). It means that these young women's lives will not change for the better through a bargaining process between their cultural background and gender equality but with attention to both agendas including equal access to material resources and equal rights under the law (Redistribution); acknowledgement that these young women have specific needs to be met due to their background _and_ gender and create a space where these needs are met (Recognition) and finally, the importance of guarantee participation (direct or indirect) in decisions concerning these girls (Representation). Fraser (2007) developed a definition of Representation that includes participation in local decision-making mechanisms and, mainly, the concept of 'frame' and how to operate across national boarders when searching for justice. This concept is of extreme importance to transnational feminism when studying women that are in a different country than the oppressive establishment they are challenging. However, in this research we will limit the use of Representation to its most basic definition, as we will not analyse issues presented across national boarders.

Australian policies: Both multiculturalism and gender equality are areas covered by Educational policies in Queensland and Australia in general since the 1970's. Girls and all members of minority groups are seen as in need of policies and practices at school level to foster equality. These policies have mixed reviews and were continually changed throughout the years. At times it meant a commitment to social inclusion and equality and in other it meant attending immediate governmental and workforce needs. It is a somewhat consensus that policies addressing both agendas are

less questioning of the status quo than what they once were and as a consequence less effective to promote social equality (10).

The research: In this ongoing research I aim to see how migrant girls from Non English Speaking Backgrounds perceive the education they receive in Australia, their formal and informal supports to learn the language and 'belong' to the school community, always considering that there may be moments that their needs as young women could contradict with their needs as members of a small NESB community. In addition people referred by the girls, in a snowball process, were interviewed in order to acquire more information regarding the girl's schooling experience. These 'others' included mothers, fathers, childcare workers, siblings and extended families.

I had in-depth interviews with 7 girls, 4 being in high school and 3 in primary school. The ages ranged from 7 to 15 years old, with 2 sisters, 2 good friends and another 3 girls not related to any other girl interviewed in the research. They were from 3 different backgrounds, 4 being Brazilians, 2 Macedonians and 1 Iraqi. They came from households where both parents migrated from the same country and only one of the participants had been born in Australia. The reasons behind their migration varied but they were mainly based on the father's assessment and capacity to acquire work, and they ranged from 2 and a half to 8 years of migration. All but one of the girls had visited their country of origin at least once since migrating.

Table 1 – Participants' Demographics*

Name	Nationality	Age	School	Time in Australia	Visa status
Daeneris	Iraqi	15	Public High School	8 years	Citizen
Talisa	Brazilian	13	Public High School	3 years	Temporary visa
Osha	Brazilian	8	Public Primary school	3 years	Temporary visa
Margaery	Brazilian	9	Public Primary school	3 years	Permanent resident
Sansa	Macedonian	13	Catholic High School	11 years	Citizen
Arya	Macedonian	10	Public Primary school	10 years (Born in Australia)	Citizen
Ygritte	Brazilian	7	Catholic Primary School	2 and a half years	Temporary visa
Ana myself	Brazilian	31	UQ – Master's Degree	6 years	Citizen

The method of analysis utilised is a feminist analysis tool called Voice Centred Relational Method (11). Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan created this method that later was expanded to various fields of study. The method aims to give special attention to women's voices in research, through a four-step analysis system that also values the researcher – researched relationship and critical reflexivity (Byrne, Canavan and Millar, 2009).

Non-English Speaking Background (NESB): This was the only criterion the schoolgirls had to meet to be interviewed besides attending school in Australia. NESB

is defined here as *someone whose first language is not English or whose cultural background, of immediate family is derived from a non-English-speaking tradition* (12). This criteria was taken instead of simply 'being a migrant' due to an understand that language is a fundamental part of a culture, a main factor impacting on people's capacity to adapt in a country and a central part in multicultural policy.

Gender

'I never saw a girl that was more friends with boys'
(Margaery, 8 years old)

All the girls interviewed presented ideas regarding gender and its influence in their choice of playing partners, career paths and sports, but none of the girls could name a specific program at school that discussed gender and its possibilities and limitations.

They all but one seemed to believe that there are behaviours that are appropriate to one sex but not to the other and that it is just natural that girls have other girls as their close friends even though some refer to boys and girls nowadays as 'equals'. There were no perceived differences based on age, background or time of migration.

'Girls you can relate to more… can talk more personal things… to get a guy to be nice you have to rip him out of the group… otherwise they are fake…"
(Sansa, 13 years old)

The most part of the girls did not identify difference in academic achievement or subject interest based on sex and seemed to believe the opportunities and demands were equal on both boys and girls.

-I think in old days might had (differences between sexes) *but now it's more equal. Yeah!*
(Daeneris, 15 years old)

'They (boys and girls) *are equal so, no problem'*
(Tasila, 13 years old)

Dirt, mud, or sports with physical contact are seen as belonging to the masculine sphere where girls are not invited. They are expected to play with girls 'girl' things'.

'If it is tackling and something like that boys are better'
(Arya, 10 years old)

'Girls can do anything…. (But) in the woodwork I only see two girls… But they can change (subject)'
(Tasila, 13 years old)

When the girls show interest in something that 'belongs' to the boys' universe they find themselves in a situation where they need to explain their behaviour.

'I don't wear dresses… I am a tomboy. I do boy stuff'
(Arya, 10 years old)

Some of the girls challenge aspects of the gender role division, nevertheless facing some resistance:

> '*Sometimes the girls want to play with the boys of something they had arranged to play beforehand. The boys promise to play with us and suddenly leave us to go play football. This upsets me*'
> *(Ygritte, 7 years old)*

> '*I was doing soccer… when we played in HPE that's like you know… "oh why these girls are playing with us? Football is you know, we don't wanna touch them or hurt them you know, why are they playing with us?" and then we would just get angry like, the girls in our class would get angry and then we would start playing and then we would prove them* (the boys) *wrong and then afterwards they were like, you know… fine with it.*'
> *(Daeneris, 15 years old)*

It is no surprise some girls simply refuse sports altogether. Interestingly, they used experiences from their countries and their backgrounds as an explanation to why they do not do sports or enjoy them instead of the clear gender division on the matter.

> "*I thought it was a waste of time as we did not have to do* (sports) *in my country*"
> *(Daeneris, 15 years old)*

> '*Here I am forced to choose a sport but I don't like sports… did not like in my country either*'
> *(Tasila, 13 years old)*

In career choice, many ideas are on the sphere of professions usually associated with females – Design, arts, teaching etc. When a girl mentioned a profession outside the expected, such as computer engineering she explained,

> '*I told her* (family friend) *that there are more boys who do it than girls and she's like 'that's why I'm doing it and we should prove them wrong" so yeah, yeah you know, the idea that boys can do this and the girls not… yeah it's really not true you know, they are equal…*'
> *(Daeneris, 15 years old)*

You can see in these examples ongoing stereotypes regarding girls' and boys' roles and very little questioning seems to come from the school structure itself. None of the girls referred to school or individual teacher's initiatives that challenged gender stereotypes; this challenge came only from external support or their own initiative.

Multiculturalism

> "(At the beginning) *I was stuck with my words*"
> *(Ygritte, 7 years old)*

Only two girls described their current schools as 'multicultural' and as 'valuing multiculturalism' and one of them associated it to 'being safe'. All other girls seemed

satisfied with their schools. All the girls interviewed had good marks at school and many had writing as their favourite subject.

Some girls mentioned teachers as part of the team necessary to help them learn English however most girls mentioned friends as their main help. The communication strategies used by teachers while the students developed their English were very similar to the ones used by the student's friends and they varied from electronic dictionaries, pointing, drawing and sending written notes to the student or the parents. None of the girls could speak English before moving to Australia neither belonged to a family where their main carer did.

Unsurprisingly, all the girls had their mothers as their main carers. Mothers (I interviewed all 6 mothers) described the difficult times of the first weeks of adaptation and all the fear and angst, as they did not know how the schools worked in this new country and they could not communicate with the school staff. Many described feeling they had to do more than an average parent would, and some of the girls also remembered the first months at school as very difficult and isolating.

During our interviews, mothers and fathers identified themselves as responsible for keeping the native language and original culture, with this need competing with the need to learn a new language and 'belong' here. Many girls displayed good language skills as they all speak their own language at home, however, they were concerned they may fall behind in the future.

Currently only two of the girls interviewed can read and write in their language of origin, however, all the other girls are learning or intend to learn. The mothers were the ones taking the responsibility to teach writing and reading in their language while fathers would support with learning English as many mothers felts inadequate to help their daughters due to their own English language limitations. None of the families expected school support towards maintenance of original language and culture.

"I am very scared I am loosing my language".
(Ygritte, 7 years old)

'When I grow up a bit more my mother will teach me (writing), *because if she teaches me now I will forget English'*
(Osha, 8 years old)

'They (parents) *want to speak English but I don't let them… because my English is better then theirs…. We must speak Portuguese at home'*
(Osha, 8 years old)

Mothers and daughters told me of moments where the girls found themselves assisting their family members through teaching them English or interpreting to other institutions including their own schools. Only one participant mentioned the use of professional interpreters at school.

"…for her (mother) *I am an English teacher".*
(Margaery, 8 years old)

'If it is my school meeting my brother interprets and vice versa'
(Daeneris, 15 years old)

When analysing the maintenance and valuing of the culture of origin by the school community it seemed very limited to the celebration of Harmony Day and other Fair type events where, annually or bi-annually, Non English Speaking students are invited to display their traditional clothing, food and flag to the rest of the school. Some of the girls could not find anything in their schools that celebrates multiculturalism and would find very limited space in the classroom to talk about their culture of origin.

All the girls are still in contact with extended family in their country of origin and a few of them felt emotional when talking about missing them. Several described situations in which the schools had accommodated their vacations in their country of origin understanding why it would be usually longer than average vacations. Nevertheless no one mentioned receiving emotional support to deal with the reality of being away from family.

"I never want to return when I am with my family… It was very difficult at the airport, I cried a lot"
(Margaery, 8 years old)

From the girls interviewed only one believed she was more Australian than a citizen of her country of origin, four described themselves as half Australians or 'becoming' slightly Australian and two were sure they were simply from their country of origin and only lived in Australia. No one had conversations regarding citizenship and belonging at their schools and they were left to discuss it only with family at home.

Gender and culture: Possibilities of conflict

Daeneris (15 years old): *'… and then I started wearing it* (the hijab) *at primary school. It was difficult; I did suffer a lot of racism and a lot of that stuff but in high school is much easier… I was teased like a lot umm; some people would pull my hijab sometimes. Yeah… They didn't know what it is, so like I don't blame them. But, they don't know what it is, they are just kids and then I didn't use to wear it and then I started wearing it so made it hard for them and me but like it was my choice like nobody really you know, tell me I have to wear it or force me to it. It was my… I like to wear it… So yeah... I think because I did visit my primary school… after me like, there is more Muslim girls came and they were, yeah, they became more open. So, umm made really huge difference… they* (the teachers) *were trying to, you know, like to explain without hurting my feelings but it was difficult for them…'*

Daeneris started talking about this subject when I asked about difficulties at school. She also told me that she did not disclose this experience to her mother for 6 years being scared her mother would be deeply hurt by it. She finally disclosed this experience to her mother a month before this interview. Daeneris was aware that the teachers did not know how to deal with the situation and she seemed to believe that now, after her experience of racism and with the school having more exposure to girls wearing hijab, the teachers may know what to do.

'if I didn't wear the hijab and I didn't get this you know, kind of reactions from the students and then the teacher not knowing how to speak to them and then they did (tried), *they'd do to other girls so it's good that happened to me and then, and then they* (students and teachers) *learned…"*
(Daeneris, 15 years old)

Part of her experience is the society's ongoing questioning regarding her choice to wear the hijab. While the truth is that her parents were surprised with her decision and even discouraging (her mother just wore the hijab from age 28 and wanted the same to her daughter), many people, including teachers, have asked her if she was forced to wear the hijab by her family and religion and did not believe when she answered it was her choice.

Here we can see one of the many possibilities of conflict between multiculturalism and gender equality. A teacher that sees the hijab, as a sign of female oppression and not a religious and cultural symbols, would possibly struggle to explain to other students the importance of respecting the headscarf and that keeping the hijab is in the Muslim girl's best interest. Nevertheless, such assumptions bring an understanding of family and minority communities' dynamic that in Daeneris case are simply untrue. In addition Daeneris did not mention any instance in which the school talked to her or the other students about choice, cultural differences and the best way to solve the problem. It is also interesting to note that this was the only girl interviewed that was openly interested in challenging gender stereotypes for the benefit of women as a collective and the only girl interested in a non female-stereotypical career path.

In many ways looking only to her hijab can take the focus away from important personality characteristics, agency and active resistance to gender oppression. In addition, focusing on the hijab favours a number of assumptions that in the case of this girl and this family were not true. There may (or may not) be a conflict between gender equality and wearing the hijab for cultural and religious reasons, however, once we can acknowledge that we can also identify the possible common agendas, in the case of Daeneris, the right over her own body (not having other people removing her headscarf), supporting a non female-stereotypical career path and encouraging the practice of non female-stereotypical sport practices and social interactions with both sexes.

Conclusion: The research, while not finalised, points to high resilience among these migrant women and girls from Non English Speaking Backgrounds as the main factor behind their school achievement. Friends and family are seen as the main help in developing language and contributing to the feeling of belonging in a new country. Interpersonal support seemed to foster these girls' high resilience more than any other factor.

Even when they appeared to be satisfied with their schools in Australia there were no strong references to school programs or staff help that really impacted positively on these girls' settlement and school success. Maybe as a result, none of the interviewees suggested a teacher to participate in this research.

When analysing the girls' experiences regarding the schools' resources available to them against the transnational feminist categories presented by Fraser there were no surprising results:

Redistribution: It seemed that the girls as migrants had full access to study and support regarding different subjects (even though the parents of girls in temporary visas have considerably more expensive school fees to pay). Nevertheless they did not have equitable access when compared to boys as they identify a number of sports, games, spaces and careers that are still unavailable to them (because they are 'boys' domain) even if at first they describe boys and girls as 'equals'.

Recognition: There was very little provided in these girls' schools towards valuing their cultural heritage (school fairs and some classroom talks) and certainly no programs concerning the maintenance of culture and language. Maybe the main example of good practice in recognition regarding these girls' backgrounds was the fact that the schools were supportive of the girls' needs to be absent for longer than other students when going on holidays. Regarding the girls as females we could not identify programs or situations that attend their specific needs and certainly nothing regarding the needs of specific girls 'members of minority cultural groups'.

Representation: There were no examples of spaces or situations in which these girls were invited to participate in decision-making or allowed to voice their opinion with the intention of changing a school practice. The school fairs focusing on multiculturalism seemed to include the students in many ways but there were no clear examples of inclusion in the main decision-making spaces.

Even though the research is not yet finalised, some actions seem clearly beneficial when aiming to pursuit gender equality and multiculturalism at school. These actions include making interpreters available for children and their parents; remembering that some information may need to be given to parents regarding the educational system and how they can help their children in the settlement process and encouraging young women to experiment with behaviours outside the stereotyped gender roles, including school subjects, recreational activities and sports. Finally, even though it is a small step, the creation of 'Nations fairs' or the celebration of 'Harmony day' could be fostered and increased as it gives opportunity for children to celebrate their cultural heritage, express themselves and it also gives teachers the chance to know their students better.

After all the interviews I asked the girls if they had anything else they would like to say before we finished, this is what Daeneris had to say:

'... You have to just… not worry what people would say... people are always judging but if you keep going and prove them wrong you know, more people will do it… Other girls will follow'
(Daeneris, 15 years old)

*The names of the participants were replaced to guarantee anonymity. They received therefore names from a famous fiction novel. The names were selected at random and do not imply any similarity of personality or otherwise between novel character and participant.

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